Reflections on Privilege, Reformism, and Activism: A response to sasha k's "'Activism' and 'Anarcho-Purism'"

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"After Seattle" — these are indeed words that have launched countless articles and even more discussions. Various sectors of the intellectual establishment, from analysts at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to Sierra Club policy wonks, have sought to make sense of the WTO protests. With an arguably renewed vigor, anti-authoritarians are also reflecting, drawing on previous debates, trying to learn lessons, and searching to understand our broader context. Ultimately, the accuracy of our analysis depends on how well we listen to and learn from one another, and from some perhaps unexpected sources of wisdom. As well, it depends on how limber and innovative we can be together in considering systems of oppressive power and struggles that build collective resistance.

In "'Activism' and 'Anarcho-Purism'", sasha k contributes to this reflective process with a critical response to my widely-circulated essay "Finding Hope After Seattle." Ostensibly a critique, sasha's piece should also be understood as a bridge between a number of important conversations. In particular, he revisits and weighs in on the developing discussion around the problematic role of the 'activist,' especially within the direct action milieu of the so-called 'anti-globalization movement.' To this end, he insightfully draws from Andrew X's "Give Up Activism", J. Kellstadt's "The Necessity and Impossibility of 'Anti-Activism'", and "Practice and Ideology in the Direct Action Movement" by *Undercurrent*.

Altogether, sasha offers a thoughtful critique that raises some vital questions. In essence, he argues that (1) I rule out "theoretical reflection on the contradiction of the movement" with the pointed accusation of 'purist anarchist'; (2) my defense of diverse tactics, demands, and strategies makes for "vague," "abstract," and "reformist" objectives lacking any "serious critique of capitalism and the state in their totality"; and worse still, (3) the 'movement' that I seek to build is one of "activists, of specialists in social change, who stand above and outside of the communities they organize." Certainly sasha has more to dish out, but here I'll focus on these, his most substantive criticisms.

Let me first emphasize that these issues aren't simply fodder for an ego battle. I respond to sasha, in fact, only because our differences represent some critical fissures within anti-authoritarian theory. More to the point, his remarks epitomize some perilous oversights on the part of many anarchists. And though I hesitate to generalize, I'll suggest that much of it comes down to a schism between, on one hand, those who (like sasha) see the state and capitalism as the major constitutive elements of our society; and, on the other hand, those who see diffuse and interlocking systems of oppressive power — such as the state, capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and others — as our social foundations. This schism amounts to two (if not more) substantially different approaches toward social change. In other words, it significantly affects why, where, and how we struggle as well as what we acknowledge as 'struggle.'

And let there be no doubt where I locate myself here: I firmly support the latter approach. Helen Luu articulates it best in her recent essay "Personal reflections on anti-racist organizing": "a movement (or movements) that is dedicated to bringing down all forms of oppression *simultaneously* with challenging global capitalism is the kind of movement/movements we must endeavour to work towards if we are truly serious about fighting for a world that is free and just for all." I'll add that this approach is complex, messy, and rarely straightforward. It involves doing what some smugly eschew: understanding that systems of power affect all of us in a multiplicity of ways and that we effectively resist them through diverse, even so-called 'reformist,' means. Critically assessing 'activism' is certainly crucial here, as is reflecting on our own role as anti-authoritarians.

Power and privilege

To start, I must make an admission: in "Finding Hope," I irresponsibly parroted an oft-repeated myth of a movement 'born' in Seattle. sasha rightfully critiques my failure here. There is in fact a frequently overlooked context to the WTO protests. Foremost, as Pauline Hwang notes, "What the media and the post-Seattle 'movement' are making a fuss over as 'corporate globalization' or 'capitalist globalization' are the same old imperialist, colonialist and patriarchal and — yes racist — policies that have plagued the planet for centuries." In other words, 'globalization' is nothing new; it has very deep roots.

Likewise, resistance has deep roots. The actions of November 1999 were the outgrowth of centuries of struggle, which arguably began with indigenous resistance to colonization in what was later called 'the Americas.' Even in terms of neoliberalism, spirited defiance is nothing new. Workers in El Salvador, students in Mexico, indigenous people in Nigeria, farmers in India, and welfare recipients in the US, for example, have resisted this latest manifestation of capitalism and colonialism (and its disastrous effects) for decades. And from Manila in 1996 to Vancouver in 1997, Geneva in 1998 to Melbourne in 2000, people have militantly protested international trade summits. Quebec anti-authoritarians, organizing against the Summit of the Americas, have introduced an apt slogan in this regard: "It didn't start in Seattle…and it sure as hell isn't going to stop with Quebec." In short, this resistance is ongoing, often spearheaded by people of color and indigenous peoples; by no means was it 'born' in Seattle.

It's absolutely critical to make this admission because the myth of the 'Seattle movement' is one prop in a bulwark of white supremacy that sidelines or ignores the central role of people of color in a continuity of resistance. And sasha deserves thanks for confronting my complicity in reinforcing it.

Unfortunately, beyond this important point, he seems otherwise wholly unconcerned with the consequences and dynamics of racism specifically, and of many other systems of power more generally. And this isn't a minor oversight on his part; it's embedded in his assumptions. "The movement of the exploited and excluded," he writes passionately, "which is antagonistic to capitalism and the state…is a movement that grows out of our present social conditions and our desires for a different world." A noble sentiment for sure, but exactly who does "our" refer to? And what are "our" present social conditions?

If he refers to *us*, as in all people, then our social conditions are widely divergent as we navigate through a complex matrix of systems that award or oppress us, in finely-tuned degrees, based on our genders, colors, cultures, classes, citizenship statuses, first languages, ages, sexualities, and much more. Certainly we have commonalities in our social conditions, yet also very distinct particularities. Any accurate radical analysis requires a focus on both.

But I don't think sasha, along with the approach that he represents, cares to notice particularities. The presumption is a social reality in which we are all evenly oppressed, largely undifferentiated, "enmeshed," as he says, in "capitalist social relations." This generalization is actually easy to make, assuming one is privileged and insulated enough to ignore the specifics of oppressive systems, especially those that don't fall under the rubric of "capitalism and the state."

Meanwhile, the opposing 'liberatory' vision offered is no better. Take, for instance, sasha's version of an "anarchist ethics": "an affirmation of the creativity, desire and power of the individual; it is an affirmation of the ability of individuals to come together and decide their own fate without the need of any imposed decision coming in from the outside whether in 'totalitarian'

or 'democratic' form." Again, a noble sentiment, but what about culture, gender, class, sexuality, race, and the so many other differences and ties between us? Whether we are generalized as the "exploited and excluded" or abstracted as one-dimensional "individuals," the systems of power that differentiate and exploit us don't disappear; and neither does resistance firmly situated in marginalization and difference, from the Lesbian Avengers to the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People in Nigeria.

sasha might have offered some relevant theoretical nuances here. Indeed, he might have refined the stronger elements of his analysis — that is, if he had engaged with my discussion of power and privilege in "Finding Hope." Instead he dismisses it as my "rhetoric of white privilege," suggesting that the more crucial question should concern "the activist/organizer's role as a specialist in social change." Certainly the discussion of 'activism' is compelling as well as attractive in its theoretical subtleties and practical implications. However, it's best considered *in tandem* with other questions, not to their exclusion.

What is unfortunately lost in this dismissal is not only my tentative remarks about privilege among white, middle-class 'radicals,' but also a considerable history of white supremacy, in particular, as it has undermined social movements in the US. As Robert and Pamela Allen painstakingly document in *Reluctant Reformers*, white privilege has been an Achilles' heel in major movements from abolitionism to labor, all of which "have either advocated, capitulated before, or otherwise failed to oppose racism at one or more critical junctures in their history." Far from "rhetoric," this is very much a reality. And white supremacy isn't the only system of power with a sordid history in US movements; patriarchy and heterosexism, as well as capitalist class stratification (classism), among many others, have their own tangled legacies and tangible realities, each also affording their own sets of privileges.

Following these histories, then, I argue — as I argued in "Finding Hope" — that, as people ostensibly committed to dismantling oppressive power and privilege, we must consider how our efforts unwittingly *replicate* power and privilege. Or as Trinh T. Minh-Ha asks: "how can one re-create without re-circulating domination?" Addressing mutually-reinforcing systems of domination, challenging power and privilege as they play out in our movements, honestly and compassionately committing ourselves (beyond mere words) to a struggle against power in all of its forms — these are pieces of an answer. Evading the question, on the other hand, is a disingenuous copout. It sadly relinquishes the promise of building broad-based, truly transformative movements capable of revolutionizing our society.

'Purist anarchism' and 'reformism'

Acknowledging power and privilege has fundamental implications for how we, as anti-authoritarians, understand effective 'resistance' and true 'radicalism.' It raises thorny questions. Thus, as we grapple with these issues, the supposed converse — dreaded 'reformism' — is kicked around contentiously. If we're not careful, it threatens to delimit rather than illuminate our discussions. And of course closely connected here is the question of the 'purist anarchist,' to which sasha ties particular importance. While I dispute its special significance, I'll accept it as useful entry point.

First I should be perfectly clear: I use 'purist anarchist' in a completely pejorative sense, but not unthinkingly. Indeed, sasha nicely encapsulates this term as "a morality that tries to keep

anarchism pure and separate from certain tactics or from working with certain groups for the sake of purity." For him, however, there is a sharp split between this "morality" (a "thou shalt not") and an "anarchist ethics." "As an ethics," sasha notes, "[anarchism] is both a way of living and a way of relating to others: how can we come together — combine — in a fashion that doesn't restrict, limit and suppress the desire, creativity and active power of each other?" In his view, then, an anarchist morality is counterproductive while an anarchist ethics is vital to our work.

On this general distinction, he and I largely agree. Our differences emerge as sasha scathingly accuses me of the "Clintonification of anarchism — Clinton made the Democratic Party so bland and middle of the road that even some Republicans could applaud or join it and Dixon proposes doing the same for anarchism." sasha finds his evidence in my "abstract" conception of social change and, by implication, the "single issue" and "reformist" struggles that it encompasses. "[F]ollowing Dixon's logic," he laments, "one would have to conclude that anarchism should have almost no meaning at all." Formidable words, but they obscure more than they reveal.

Evidently sasha doesn't grasp my argument in "Finding Hope." Or else he disagrees. It's difficult to tell because, while skillfully sidestepping engagement with my discussion of privilege, he also sidesteps the main thrust of my essay: rethinking radicalism, particularly in the context of privilege. As I wrote, "we have to move beyond the myopic view — often endemic among anarchists — that the most 'important' activism only or mainly happens in the streets, enmeshed in police confrontations." In other words, spheres of traditional 'radical action' are limited and limiting. And though I don't believe that sasha fundamentally disagrees with this criticism, he refuses to accept its broader consequences. For instance, where I question the bounds of 'radicalism' with examples of struggles like opposing prison construction and establishing community and cultural centers, he conclusively points to "a set of demands and goals of which none suggest any serious critique of capitalism and the state in their totality."

There is much more to the "totality" that we all confront than capitalism and the state. That's unequivocal. Furthermore, a "totality" has an undeniable physical presence, and people do in fact contest and resist it every day through a variety of struggles using a variety of means — not all containing the "serious critique" necessary to satisfy sasha. J. Kellstadt nicely observes this, noting that an 'activist' perspective (not unlike sasha's)

> overlooks a whole layer of more "everyday" forms of resistance — from slacking off, absenteeism, and sabotage, to shopfloor "counter-planning" and other forms of autonomous and "unofficial" organizing — which conventional activists and leftists (including most anarchists) have a bad track record of acknowledging. And this still leaves out all of those modes of struggle which take place beyond the shopfloor, such as various forms of cultural and sexual revolution.

Unfortunately, sasha doesn't deign to discuss these all-too-pedestrian realities, many of which potentially embrace the very anarchist ethics he touts. They certainly have bearing on the lives of many folks and speak to a breadth of social struggle, but they apparently don't constitute a sufficient "critique."

Even if sasha were to acknowledge their importance, my sense is that he would erect a rationalized theoretical division between Kellstadt's "everyday forms of resistance" and 'reformism.' No doubt, he would use a rhetorical sleight of hand on par with the "simple fact of language that those who want to reform the present system are called reformists." A seemingly irrefutable,

self-apparent statement, this actually glosses over legitimate questions: Are 'reformists' so easily discernible and cleanly categorized? Are all 'reforms' equal? Can they be part of a long-term revolutionary strategy?

So let's talk plainly about reformism. No matter how much some might wish otherwise, it simply isn't a cut-and-dry issue. And while it actually deserves a book-length examination, here I'll sketch some general considerations. Principally, I ask, assuming that we share the goal of dismantling systems of power and restructuring our entire society in nonhierarchical ways, what role does reform play? Must we eschew it, unconditionally embrace it, or is there another approach?

sasha steadfastly represents one rather limited 'radical' view. To bolster his critique of 'reformism,' for instance, he critically cites one of the examples in my essay: demanding authentic public oversight of police. "[This] might be a small step for social change in some general sense," he argues, "but ultimately it is a step backwards as it strengthens the legitimacy of the police and of imposed decision." I respect the intent of this critique; it makes sense if one is privileged enough to engage with the police on terms of one's own choosing. Yet in real life, it's both simplistic and insulated.

Look at it this way: accepting sasha's argument, are we to wait until the coming insurrectionary upheaval before enjoying an end to police brutality? More specifically, are African-American men to patiently endure the continued targeting of "driving while Black"? Should they hold off their demands for police accountability so as to avoid strengthening "the legitimacy of the police and of imposed decision"? And if they don't, are they 'reformists'? Many folks who experience daily police occupation understand that ending the "imposed decision" (often epitomized by police) will require radical change, and they work toward it. At the same time, they demand authentic public oversight of police forces. The two don't have to be mutually exclusive. I'll even suggest that they can be *complementary*, especially if we acknowledge the legacies of white supremacy and class stratification embedded in policing.

Ultimately, we need a lucid conception of social change that articulates this kind of complementarity. That is, we need revolutionary strategy that links diverse, everyday struggles and demands to long-term radical objectives, without sacrificing either. Of course, this isn't to say that every so-called 'progressive' ballot initiative or organizing campaign is necessarily radical or strategic. Reforms are not all created equal. But some can fundamentally shake systems of power, leading to enlarged gains and greater space for further advances. Andre Gorz, in his seminal book *Strategy for Labor*, refers to these as "non-reformist" or "structural" reforms. He contends, "a struggle for non-reformist reforms — for anti-capitalist reforms — is one which does not base its validity and its right to exist on capitalist needs, criteria, and rationales. A non-reformist reform is determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be."

Look to history for examples: the end of slavery, the eight-hour workday, desegregation. All were born from long, hard struggles, and none were endpoints. Yet they all struck at the foundations of power (in these cases, the state, white supremacy, and capitalism), and in the process, they created new prospects for revolutionary change. Now consider contemporary struggles: amnesty for undocumented immigrants, socialized health care, expansive environmental protections, indigenous sovereignty. These and many more are arguably non-reformist reforms as well. None will single-handedly dismantle capitalism or other systems of power, but each has the potential to escalate struggles and sharpen social contradictions.

And we shouldn't misinterpret these efforts as simply meliorative incrementalism, making 'adjustments' to a fundamentally flawed system. Certainly that tendency exists, but there are plenty

of other folks working very consciously within a far more radical strategy, pushing for a *qualitative* shift in struggle. "To fight for alternative solutions," Gorz writes, "and for structural reforms (that is to say, for intermediate objectives) is not to fight for improvements in the capitalist system; it is rather to break it up, to restrict it, to create counter-powers which, instead of creating a new equilibrium, undermine its very foundations." Thankfully, this is one approach among a diverse array of strategies, all of which encompass a breadth of struggles and movements. Altogether, they give me hope.

I presume sasha would see some merit in this analysis. To his credit, he admits that, "as anarchists, we can work with [reformists] towards intermediate aims, while always remaining clear as to how such aims tally with our ultimate goals." This is the traditional anarchist line, and I basically agree with it. Indeed, it implies that some efforts toward reform are compatible with long-term struggles against systems of power, as I have argued. Moreover, in my understanding, it recognizes the importance of articulating — "remaining clear" about — the anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist politics that we bring to our work, which is critical for broadening and strengthening movements.

But as we bring our politics, let's not kid ourselves. Regardless of our posturing, we don't have all of the answers. As much as an anarchist ethics highlights individual freedom, it also values the importance of openness, dialogue, and growth. In the words of Carlos Fernandez, "We need to keep our lives open, experiencing difference, learning our limits and common grounds." That — beside the obvious strategic importance — is the beauty of working with so-called 'reformists': we have the opportunity to learn from others just as they learn from us, and we grow in the process. If we don't, we're just arrogant assholes — and 'purist anarchists' to boot.

'Activism'

Underlying much of this dialogue is the question of 'activism.' By far, this is sasha's most important contribution in "'Activism' and 'Anarcho-Purism,'" and I would be remiss to ignore it. His strength, in truth, is not so much in introducing new ideas here as in synthesizing those of Andrew X and J. Kellstadt and applying them to the evolving direct action milieu in the US (which, if anything, desperately needs more critical reflection). For the sake of clarity, this cogent discussion warrants a brief review.

In "Give Up Activism," Andrew X warns that the socially-constructed role of 'the activist' is profoundly limiting and woefully inadequate for the task of doing away with capitalism. "The activist," he notes, "is a specialist or an expert in social change," which contradicts our very intent as anarchists — the abolition of privileged social roles. Moreover,"Activism is based on this misconception that it is only activists who do social change — whereas of course class struggle is happening all the time." Consequently, he argues, we must problematize the activist role.

In "The Necessity and Impossibility of 'Anti-Activism,'" J. Kellstadt agrees with this premise, but complicates Andrew X's critique by adding that a social role cannot simply be 'given up.' "Social groups of whatever kind — be they cops, priests, and parents, or anarchists and activists — come into existence through complicated social processes." And thus they cannot be individually 'willed away.' As a solution, Kellstadt proposes embracing "simultaneously *the necessity and the impossibility* of 'giving up activism.'" S/he suggests "living the tension" of this irreconcilable con-

tradiction, struggling to revolutionize our society while recognizing that it nonetheless shapes and constrains our efforts and identities.

sasha, meanwhile, develops the substantial common ground between Andrew X and J. Kellstadt. Dialectically rejecting both overly subjective 'role-suicide' and overly objective social or historical determinism, he insists, "there are always openings to different types of self-organization. We may not be able to kill the role, but we are not stuck in it either; and, if we are to rid ourselves of capitalism we need to struggle in a different way and not celebrate the role of the activist."

Regrettably, sasha doesn't elaborate on these "openings to different types of self-organization" or "a different way" of struggling, both of which are potentially rich and especially vital sources of inquiry. But he does find plenty of space to offer my argument in "Finding Hope" as a resounding example of the "activist mentality." As he says, "it relies solely on getting more people involved, more people organizing and organized, but lacks the reflection necessary to begin to move us towards a qualitatively different practice." More damningly, he charges that I "reinforce and celebrate the specialized role of the activist as one who stands outside and above the masses — the famous real people — to be organized."

I will confess that "Finding Hope After Seattle" was never intended as a wholesale consideration of activism, but rather as a critique of some problematic dynamics at the heart of the recent string of summit protests. In essence, I wanted to blow open the confines of the 'protest,' the 'lockdown,' and the 'action.' More so, I sought to ask, with Helen Luu, "Who gets to decide what is 'radical' in the first place and who gets left out because of that definition?" I wanted to strain that term, to push us to recognize the many loci and circumstances of social struggle beyond orchestrated street confrontations — and to find hope in them.

I owe sasha gratitude, then, for connecting this critique to crucial broader questions. Interrogating activism has shed considerable light on my original line of criticism. In fact, the critique of the activist role, especially as sasha synthesizes it, fits well with my more truncated criticisms in "Finding Hope." And judging from my correspondence and travels, both resonate widely. Indeed, I've seen a widespread search among many folks looking to move to the next qualitative step, to constructively push at the bounds of 'activism' and 'radicalism.'

In this regard, it's instructive to look at James Mumm's 1998 article "Active Revolution: New Directions in Revolutionary Social Change," which has captured renewed interest recently. Mumm's central focus combines aspects of community organizing with anarchist theory. He argues that successful anarchist organizing is fundamentally about building relationships, developing "power with others — power that gives us the opportunity to participate in the decisions which affect our lives." He sees this process, unfolding in multiple ways and rooted in our everyday lives, as the core of an anarchist revolutionary strategy. Hence he approaches the activist role from a different angle than Andrew X, J. Kellstadt, or sasha, though he is equally critical. Identifying an activist as "a person who is responsible to a defined issue" (which, incidentally, can be anarchism itself), he observes, "The constituency of activism is other activists and potential activists, motivated through their individual moral commitments to a given issue." Yet, he warns, "primary commitment to an issue is in contradiction to a primary commitment to *power with others*."

I don't agree with all of Mumm's conclusions, specifically his exclusive insistence on organizing. For him, activism is obviously flawed and therefore organizing is the only remaining answer. And while I don't deny that organizing in a variety of venues and ways is crucial, I'm simply unwilling to accept it as *the* answer. With sasha, then, I'll suggest that we should continue looking

for "openings" and "a different way," always with a commitment to putting theory into practice and vice versa.

That said, let me stress that Mumm has much to offer. His strategy is prefigurative as it seeks to subvert power through organizing nonhierarchically outside often self-involved anarchist and activist circles. As well, it sidesteps some of the pitfalls of activism as it seeks to develop relationships among people rather than mobilizations around issues. In a sense, Mumm resurrects that old adage of 'base-building' — building organized, rooted bases of resistance — which is part of any successful revolutionary strategy. This is key, for I suspect our collective task ahead will be to redefine and extend the concept of 'base.' To greater or lesser degrees, social movements are already doing this, both in traditional spheres such as neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools, as well as in nontraditional ones like cultural centers, borders, prisons, and queer communities, among many others. The question is, are we, as anti-authoritarians, paying attention and how are we participating?

As I mention this, I realize that it is probably right here that sasha and I conclusively part ways. I just don't think that he is willing to embrace a strategy that would so openly threaten his approach. While he is fiercely skeptical of activists, sasha is equally fierce and deeply exclusionary when it comes to his cherished "anarchist ethic." As he writes,

> Living this ethic will mean that one will come into conflict with imposed social order, with hierarchy, with any archy or cracy. To live this ethic is thus not always an easy choice, we can't make it into a Snickers Bar; anyhow, no matter how drained of content anarchism becomes the masses won't run to sign up any day soon.

This, then, is the crux. To sasha's mind, anarchists are an insurgent elite, valiant warriors in an eternal conflict with "imposed social order." And with only thinly veiled contempt, he pities "the masses" unwilling to make the "not always easy choice." Perhaps he finds this poetic or inspiring, but frankly it's bullshit. I'm left wondering if he even cares about strengthening or building social movements. Mostly I'm awed by sasha's impressive ability to overlook the obvious parallels between the "specialists in social change" which he so disdains and his celebratory version of those few who gallantly live "the ethic."

In the end, I have no interest in building this kind of radical elite, or a movement of 'activists,' or for that matter, an all-inclusive liberal 'reform' movement. As anarchists, we should be more ambitious than any of those limited options. And we have good reason. A growing contingent of anti-authoritarians is grappling with ways to radically bridge struggles and strengthen resistance. Many, many people are pushing the envelope and experimenting with inspiring projects — from community-rooted anarchist organizing in Bellingham, Washington to networks among anti-authoritarians of color in Montreal. The most worthwhile aspect of critiquing the activist role is in opening up just these kinds of possibilities for innovative modes of organization and sharpened social struggles.

Fortunately our path ahead is forged collectively. Let's endeavor, then, as sasha urges, to bring a true spirit of critical reflection to bear on our efforts. And to borrow a phrase from James Mumm, let's stop trying to create an insular *movement of anarchists* and instead fight for *anti-authoritarian movements*. That is, let's build and ally ourselves with vibrant, diverse movements capable of connecting daily struggles to long-term revolutionary efforts and confronting complex systems of power and privilege. I maintain that ultimately that's where hope lies.

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